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‘Space and the Geographical Imagination on the Dublin Docklands’

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Space and the Geographical Imagination on the Dublin Docklands

Abstract

*In my practice-based doctoral study **Dublin Dockers, Visualising a Changing Community**, I am foregrounding the application of audiovisual ethnographic documentary methods and investigation in examining the world of a docker and stevedore community on Dublin's docks. Through excavating and recuperating narratives which are absent from mainstream media hegemony, the study is unraveling the transformations experienced by a stevedore constituency as a consequence of globalisation, urban regeneration and the current recession. This paper engages with arguments for the revitalisation of our imaginations on space in the context of an audio visual and textual study of the urban and maritime Dublin dockland space.*

Introduction

The history of the Dublin Docklands can be read as a microcosm of the history of Ireland, both ancient and modern. The making of the Docklands is a complex tapestry of great engineering achievement, visionary planning, intrigue, economic rise and decline, and human triumph over adversity. (Dublin Dockland Development Authority 1997:18 cited in Moore 2010:15)

The Dublin Docklands are of course more than a geographical space; this is a multi-dimensional space, a product of many forces including historical and economic necessity, business elitism, globalisation, contemporaneous regeneration and cultural affiliation. The above statement by the DDDA acknowledges the complexity of the strands that have been interlaced over centuries in the construction of the Docklands. In painting a polished image of this achievement as heroic it may obscure the more troubled social and economic histories of local indigenous communities. According to Held, globalisation can be understood as 'spatiotemporal processes of change which

underpin a transformation in the organisation of human affairs by linking together and expanding human activity across regions and continents' (1999:15 cited in Moore 2004:213). Whilst it is not within the scope of this presentation to analyse in depth Held and his colleagues' studies on globalisation, it is fair to say that any concept of globalisation as fundamentally geographical may overlook a more disruptive conjuncture of narratives. As Massey poses:

Clearly the world is not totally globalised ...as in the case of modernity, this is geographical imagination which ignores the structured divides, the necessary ruptures and inequalities, the exclusions, on which the successful prosecution of the project itself depends. ...This is again – a geographical imagination which ignores its own spatiality. (2005: 84)

Massey's inspired arguments for rejuvenating our imagination of space, globalisation and place are well established. I wish however to investigate with fresh eyes how they perform in a space such as the Dublin Docklands.

Beyond Geographical Space

A re-orientation of space invites us to consider it as 'not a mere surface, or a single narrative but a multiplicity of trajectories' (ibid.:9). Massey boils down her argument on space into three key propositions, proposing firstly that we recognise 'space as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny' (ibid.: 9). The Dublin Docklands is not an homogenous site but a space that has emerged as a consequence of a complexity of connections at play. It is the very interaction of historical and contemporaneous forces from the 'immensity of the global to the intimately tiny' that make the Dublin Docklands a socially, physically and economically multi-dimensional space.

Dublin Port in a small harbour on the River Liffey was initially within the confines of the city, but it expanded in the nineteenth century and was relocated eastwards away from the centre and close to the sea ((Moore 2010:12). This strategically positioned port then emerged into a highly advantageous space for trading ships and hence Ireland's economy. Residential port workers' communities developed along the north and south quays with most working men employed as labourers and carters on the docks and women as domestic workers in other parts of the city. This docklands space already in its early formation was the product of the interrelations of geography, economics and the social as constituted through the interaction of the immensity of the global (trading ships) and the intimately tiny (docker communities). But this was not and is not a fixed space.

Massey secondly proposes that we recognise 'space as always under construction.... always in the process of being made' (2005:9). The dockland communities were set east from the centre of the city, whether in Ringsend or Sherriff Street and they were considered to be on 'the wrong side of the tracks', literally meaning that they were the other side of the main railway line (Brady & Simms in Moore 2010:12). By the twentieth century the area became home to the poorer strata of society with insufficient amenities or recreational facilities and a lack of open space (Moore 2004). The post-World War II international growth of container traffic and shift from rail to road led to loss of employment on the Dublin docks. This gave rise to rapid physical degeneration, poverty and intolerable housing conditions considered at the time reminiscent of Third World cities (ibid.). By the 1980s, the rupturing of the traditionally tight-knit communities resulted in the emergence of serious socio-economic difficulties, social disorder, vandalism and the area yielded to a flood of heroin and drug dealing as an alternate way of life. Caught in a particular moment of

time, one image of this space in the mid 1980s could have shown widespread poverty co-existing with international trading. Continuing global and local change, however, over the next three decades confound this image of the docklands' space.

This leads us to Massey's third proposal that we understand space as the 'sphere of possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the sense of contemporaneous plurality; as the sphere in which distinct trajectories coexist; as the sphere of coexisting heterogeneity' (2005:9). Certainly, the docklands' space offered and continues to offer a sphere of possibility, but the distinct trajectories that have emerged over the late twentieth century have not had an easy coexistence. Global technological and economic changes resulted in increased mechanisation and labour decasualisation on Dublin's docklands. Whilst the so called 'new world' practices as performed on the docks were considered progress for amongst others the shipping companies, since the 1980's they have been a devastating blow for former dockers. For stevedore companies to survive the demands of a once militant workforce, labourers were disciplined and controlled with lower wages whilst automation lessened employment opportunities (Sekula 1995). The residential docking communities' plight was further compounded by migration from the area with the neighbourhood profile becoming one of vulnerable and largely elderly, unemployed and educationally disadvantaged people (Moore 1999).

A dramatic and unexpected trajectory then came into play, when, after a period of retreat from the waterfront, the docklands became a target for development renewal projects (Kokot 2009). As part of an urban renewal programme in the late 1990s, the newly named Dublin Docklands became a 'hotspot' or 'engine of the Celtic tiger boom' (Moore 2005:219). Land prices soared and the

increase of local housing prices introduced a new urban gentry which excluded the remaining indigenous community; the houses were out of the affordable house bracket for those who had grown up in the area resulting in many having to move out. The reconstruction of the Docklands by a business elite may have resulted in rich and poor living in geographical proximity but with a huge socio-economic gulf between the two. The economic restructuring of the last two decades has re-shaped this society and space resulting in further socio-economic exclusion, polarisation and invisibility. The local communities use the term 'economic cleansing' to describe what has happened in their neighbourhoods (Hogan 2006: 32). Rather than the distinct trajectories of business elitism and social need coexisting, 'formerly cohesive neighbourhood identity and class structure has been fragmented' (Hogan 2005a: 121). Urban regeneration, gentrification, globalisation, business elitism and transnational shipping have irreversibly impacted the traditional residential and working communities along the Dublin Docklands (Hogan 2006; MacDonald 2000). The space that is the Dublin Docklands has now transformed beyond recognition. As Massey argues:

But places go on without you. A nostalgia, or a set of expectations that does not take account of that deprives others of their agency, denies their ongoing histories. It converts their coeval, different space into a moment in your time. In a move that is a form of colonisation, it holds others still. (2003:115).

A study of the transformed space of the Dublin Docklands is therefore only complete when the narratives and histories of those rendered invisible are woven into the 'complex tapestry of great engineering achievement, visionary planning, intrigue, economic rise and decline, and human triumph over adversity' (DDDA 1997:18)

Space and the Senses

I argue furthermore that a revitalised geographic imagination must also extend to include the sensuous nature of Dublin Port; images, sounds, smells. Sekula however signals the disappearance of these elements:

In the past, harbour residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled. The wealth of nations would slide by in the channel. One learned a biased national physiognomy of vessels; Norwegian ships are neat and Greek ships are grimy. Things are more confused now. (Sekula 1995:12)

Until very recently Dublin's docklands were primarily viewed as a maritime district beyond the city centre. Being an island, Ireland's key means of trading has traditionally been through her seaports, with Dublin Port handling over two-thirds of containerised trade to and from Ireland and 50% of all Ireland's imports and exports (Dublin Port Authority 2010). After almost two decades of the Celtic tiger¹, the ugly urban scenes of the 1980's along the docks have been replaced by the sheen of post-modern architecture and engineering. Economic internationalisation and rejuvenation of the docklands have resulted in Dublin Port becoming part of 'a fluctuating web of connections between metropolitan regions and exploitable peripheries' (Sekula 1995: 48). Globalisation and information technology have therefore contributed to a new spatiality which centres around cross-border connections (Sassen 2000). The activity on the Dublin docks, which operates as part of this complex global digitalised structure, is largely invisible to those working and living within a stones throw from the port. Cheap goods from South East Asia can be in Dublin within a month. Moreover the containerisation of cargo movement, pioneered by the US shipping companies in the 1950s, has reduced loading and unloading time. Thus there are greatly increased cargo loads along the docklands but we don't know what they are. There are no longer smells or sights, just sanitised containers. As Sekula points out 'despite increasing international

¹ The Celtic Tiger is a metaphor coined by US Investment Bank Morgan Stanley in August 1994 and has become an accepted term for the rapid growth and transformation of the Irish economy in the 1990s.

mercantile dependence on ocean transport, and despite advances in oceanography and marine biology, the sea is in many respects less comprehensible to today's elites than it was before 1945, in the nineteenth century, or even during the Enlightenment' (ibid.:54). By contrast, oral history, according to Kearns, recalls the Dublin docks as 'a world of masts, funnels, towering cranes, barges, carts, horses...a hundred sounds becoming a symphony of dockland' (1991:30). Archival film and photographic imagery from the 1950s² depicts cattle movement across the mouth of the River Liffey onto the docks. Today along the docks, on first sight, there is little sense of what goods are being moved in containers and, moreover, there is little to indicate the importance of the role that the sea plays in transporting crucial commodities to and from Ireland. However, if you move beyond the scenic views of the Dublin Docklands, and venture deep into the heart of the South Coal Quay, you might come across the grime and dust of dockworkers unloading vital commodities such as eco cement or coke which have travelled from Russia on a Greek owned, Polish captained ship.

When Friedrich Engels set out to describe the living and working conditions of the English working class, he began by standing on the deck of a ship in 1844. He describes moving down the river of the Thames from the open space of the sea: 'The further one goes up the river the thicker the concentration of ships lying at anchor. All this is so magnificent and impressive that one is lost in admiration' (Engels 1845:30 in Sekula 1995: 42). This wonder subsides as he moves from the panoramic space of the sea to an 'ugly' (ibid.) urban scene in the closed slum spaces of London's main streets. Perhaps if he had traveled from Dublin Bay down the mouth of the Liffey less than

²This can be accessed in the RTE and Irish Film Institute archives and on Alan Martin's private archive at www.bluemelon.com

thirty years ago his narrative shift from a magnificent panoramic maritime space to the ‘brutish frictions’ (ibid.) of urban life may have been very similar to that of 1845 London.

Sekula urges us to turn our consciousness back to the sea, the forgotten space, and recognise the importance of *maritime space* as opposed to the persistent focusing on cyberspace and the illusion of an instantaneous connection between far-flung lands (1995). The concept of maritime space has seized and fired my imagination for some time, inspiring the creation of an audiovisual representation of the complexities of transnational shipping in Dublin Bay and deep into Dublin Port. For the three-screen installation, *Sensing the Local* (2010), I filmed along the docks and from one of the Dublin Port Company boats with the help of the men charged with checking the buoys that guide ships in and out of Dublin Bay. For the first of the screens (Figure 1), I situated a camera on the front of the boat and began by filming out towards open sea as if from the point of view of the boat, moving through uninterrupted space and the wide expanse of Dublin bay. I wanted to re-create a sense of the panoramic boundarylessness that has so occupied the imaginations of artists from Turner to Sekula. For the second screen (Figure 2), I allow cargo, passenger and container ships to cross the field of vision as they arrive into and depart from the docklands. For the third screen (Figure 3), I observe cargo movement and docker activity on the quays deep into the heart of the docklands.

The three screen installation is thus the beginning of an attempt to depict the multi-dimensional nature of contemporary maritime space: the ship, the dockland, the local working community, the visiting crews, the globally linked technology, the containerisation of cargo, the hinterland, the developed shorelines, and so on.



Figures 1, 2, 3; 'Sensing the Local' (Installation) Digital Video, 2010

In contrast to Engel's disappointment in the mid 19th Century, in the 21st Century, I found that in moving from the panoramic expanse of Dublin Bay into the heart of the port, I was able to construct a contemporary working 'symphony of dockland'. This was my own Foucaultian 'heterotopia' (Foucault 86: 24); a real space with the sounds of birds, foghorns, cranes and moving trucks singing to all the senses.

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